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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY BERLIN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2244
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS PRIORITY 0232
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BERLIN 001318

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/23/2018
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SUBJECT: GERMANY LOOKING FOR SMALL STEP FORWARD IN BELARUS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Jeffrey Rathke for reasons:
1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: MFA and Chancellery contacts appeared in agreement regarding Belarus and expected the EU to ease restrictions following the Belarussian parliamentary elections on September 28. The GOG hopes that the elections will reflect "an improvement over last time," which in conjunction with the recent release of the last three political prisoners, will warrant the EU reviewing the restrictive measures. MFA Deputy Division Head for Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus Henning Simon opined that the EU likely would lighten the restrictive measures even if Belarus President Lukashenko recognizes South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
END SUMMARY

A SMALL STEP FORWARD

12. (C) During a conference billed as a "Friends of Belarus" meeting September 22 in Berlin, organized by the German Marshall Fund and the Bertelsmann Foundation and attended by a number of German parliamentarians and officials as well as Belarussian opposition figures, MFA Office Director for Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus Ernst Reichel repeatedly emphasized that the EU already would have eased restrictions against Belarus following the release of the final three political prisoners had it not been for the proximity of the parliamentary elections. In Reichel's view, the EU would have "looked foolish" had it eased restrictions and the elections then went horribly. However, Reichel said that the GOG views Belarus as having met the stipulations laid out in the restrictive measures and if Sunday's elections represent a "step forward," the EU will ease the restrictions. Reichel related that "even" Poland and Lithuania are interested in decreasing if not eliminating the measures. Chancellery Deputy Head of CIS Division Christoph Israng concurred with Reichel's interpretation. In a separate meeting, MFA Belarus Desk Officer Stephen Iro said that the EU may invite Belarus FM Sergei Martynov to the next GAERC on October 13-14 should the elections indicate an improvement.

BUT NOT CONTINUED RESISTANCE TO RECOGNITION

13. (C) During the conference, POLOFF stressed that the U.S. also viewed Lukashenko's continued resistance to recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as crucial to any improvement in relations, but the German delegation appeared hesitant to link broader geopolitical concerns to easing restrictions. (Note: In a separate meeting, MFA Deputy Office Director for Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus Henning Simon opined that the EU likely would lighten some of the restrictive measures even if Belarus President Lukashenko recognizes South Ossetia and Abkhazia. End Note.)

14. (C) Bundestag Green Party Member Marieluise Beck recognized that the Russia-Georgia war changes Germany's relations with Belarus, but bemoaned that Germany "had not begun" to consider the implications. Beck was part of the recent Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee trip to Moscow and

Kyiv, and related that her time in Kyiv revealed the increased Russian aggressiveness and demand for a "zone of influence." Beck questioned whether Lukashenko felt this increased aggressiveness, and Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies Director Vitali Silitski concluded that Lukashenko is playing the "West card" to maintain some independence in the face of Russian influence.

15. (C) COMMENT: Although Belarus opposition members such as Belarussian Popular Front member Lyavon Barchevski and NGO Our House member Olga Karach repeatedly argued that Sunday's elections would represent simple technical improvements rather than any real move toward democratic elections, the German participants appeared to view the technical improvement as grounds for easing EU restrictions.
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